

NEPTUNE'S HARLOT

Five years have passed since that accursed day, but I feel as though my mental state has improved sufficiently to allow me to write of my experience. Though I still suffer flashbacks, and often wake in the middle of the night screaming, sometimes I regain my sanity long enough to function, and in these moments I realize that I have a responsibility to record my tale no matter how painful the process may be. So with one final swig of vodka I settle behind my desk overlooking the harbor and begin to write...

That day began like almost any other. I had strolled from my downtown apartment to the market, approaching a fresh fish vendor with the intent of purchasing an leed specimen to prepare for my dinner. As I was about to make my purchase a cool hand closing around my wrist stopped me.

"Wait. Don't waste your money here. I know a better place we can go."

I turned to behold an attractive woman in her twenties. She was tall and trim, standing five foot ten, with blonde hair which curled tightly into braids that dropped down to her shoulders. Her hairstyle was foreign; the edges were bleached like she had spent too much time under a distant sun. Though she wore the clothing of a woman her age, tight black pants and a fine brown leather jacket, she had a look in her kelp green eyes that spoke of experiences well beyond her years. I was momentarily mesmerized, but she continued when I could not speak.

"Are you busy? Why don't you take me out to eat? I know this great seafood restaurant."

"Do I know you? I mean, do work with me? I'm not sure if I've seen you..."

She shrugged and replied,

"I know enough about you already. I promise, this restaurant is a very special place. A place you won't want to miss."

At this point the day had already taken the qualities of a dream, and perhaps this is why I agreed without further thought to take this mysterious stranger to dinner on a whim.

We walked slowly to my car, where I learned her name was Cyrene, and that she claimed to be employed as a marine biologist who traveled six months out of the year on a research vessel. I found this fascinating, but when I attempted to question her further on the subject, she

cut my queries short. I asked her where we were headed, and she replied that

"The restaurant is at the end of the road."

I naturally assumed that she was speaking of the road we were on, but it soon became apparent this was not the case. She directed me to the freeway. As we drove she grew quiet, speaking only in short sentences and occasionally pointing for me to turn here, or there, and soon we were well outside the city and had passed through the last of the suburbs. I told her I was not familiar with this area and again I asked her where we were going, but she only repeated her previous answer, urging me to continue driving on the country highway and to roll down the windows so she could breathe the fresh air.

Reaching the summit of a hill, the ocean became visible not far ahead. Cyrene pointed to a building rising above the rocky beach. I drove the final couple of miles until we reached the restaurant's gravel parking lot, and there I could clearly see the neon blue sign which read 'THE NEPTUNE'. The words were superimposed over a sexy mermaid wielding a neon pink trident. I was surprised to find the parking lot was crowded considering the isolated location of the restaurant. I parked, looking over to Cyrene. A grin traced the corners of her lips.

"We're here," she whispered. "Come on, let's eat. I bet you're starving after that drive."

I followed her through the restaurant's fishnet veiled front doors. The host had the same strange sun-bleached hairstyle as Cyrene, and her eyes were a similar shade of green. I thought at first they might be sisters, but when they did not speak to each other with any familiarity I decided to the contrary.

"You two are in luck. We've had a cancellation, and there's an excellent table available."

A single portal, made to resemble the airlock of a submarine, led down a flight of aquamarine stairs into the restaurant proper. Golden statuettes of mermaids wielding tridents stood guard at the bottom of the steps. I immediately recognized why so many had chosen to dine at the establishment. The restaurant had been built below sea level, and the walls on one side of the room were nothing but windows which looked into the sea. The inside lights had been dimmed to allow the diners a better view of the water, which in turn was illuminated in many eerie shades by slowly rotating submerged lights.

I do not think any aquarium in the world could have compared to this room. All of the creatures of the sea were represented. There were tropical fish, glowing fish,